Negation, Denial, and Rejection

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Abstract

At least since Frege (1960) and Geach (1965), there has been some consensus about the relation between negation, the speech act of denial, and the attitude of rejection: a denial, the consensus has had it, is the assertion of a negation, and a rejection is a belief in a negation. Recently, though, there have been notable deviations from this orthodox view. Rejectivists have maintained that negation is to be explained in terms of denial or rejection, rather than vice versa. Some other theorists have maintained that negation is a separate phenomenon from denial, and that neither is to be explained in terms of the other. In this paper, I present and consider these heterodox theories of the relation between negation, denial, and rejection

1. Introduction

This essay attempts to present some recent theories about the connection between negation, denial, and rejection. I'll look particularly at two kinds of theories that reject a certain orthodoxy (to be described below). This first section sets the stage.

Following, e.g., Frege (1960), we can distinguish between the *content* of a speech act and its *force*. Contents are built up out of subcontents, and a speech act itself consists of uttering (or inscribing) the content with a certain force. For example, the speech acts typically performed with utterances of 'The door is shut', 'Is the door shut?', and 'Shut the door' share a content, but differ in their forces. A speaker of the first is typically asserting the content; of the second, asking it; and of the third, commanding it. Corresponding to at least the first two of these forces there are attitudes one can adopt; one can believe the door is shut as well as assert that it is, and one can wonder whether the door is shut as well as ask whether it is.

We also have expressions for actions and attitudes that are distinctly negative. In this essay, I'll use 'deny' and 'denial' exclusively to pick out a certain type of speech act: the sort someone is engaged in when they deny something. Similarly, I'll use 'reject' and 'rejection' to pick out a certain type of attitude: the sort someone has to a content when they reject it. (Our ordinary use, particularly of 'reject', is not so rigorous about these distinctions, but it serves as a good enough guide to get the gist).

There is also an operation on contents themselves, taking one content to another, that has long been thought to be importantly related to denial and rejection: *negation*. For example, both Frege (1960) and Geach (1965) famously argue that denial and rejection should be understood in terms of negation, along with assertion and belief. For them, to deny a content just is to assert its negation, and to reject a content just is to believe its negation. If there is an orthodox position in philosophy today about the relation between denial, rejection, and negation, this is it.

This essay considers two different ways in which this orthodoxy can be rejected. In Section 2, I consider *rejectivism* about negation: the thesis that negation is to be explained

in terms of rejection or denial, rather than vice versa. I present some of the reasons rejectivists have for holding this view, and show how it avoids some initial objections. In Section 3, I consider theories that reject the orthodox position for very different reasons. These theories hold that neither negation nor denial should be explained in terms of the other, that they are independent phenomena. I give the flavor of one such view in particular – that advanced in Priest (2006) – and sketch an argument against it from a rejectivist point of view. Section 4 concludes.

Throughout, it should be noted, I make no effort to chart the historical provenance of these ideas. Instead, I aim to give citations that provide helpful threads for the so-inclined reader to follow.

2. Denial and the Origins of Negation

Some theorists – rejectivists (e.g., Price 1990; Smiley 1996; Rumfitt 2000) – hold that negation's function in our language is to be explained via its connection to the speech act of denial and its accompanying attitude of rejection. (I'll focus mainly on denial, but denial's connection to rejection will mean rejection shadows us as we go along.) They typically hold to what I'll call the *denial equivalence*: the thesis that to assert the negation of a content A is equivalent, in its conversational effects and commitments carried, to denying A. (It would be possible to hold that denial is prior to negation in some way without committing to the denial equivalence, although in fact no rejectivists seem to.) The denial equivalence, of course, is shared by the more orthodox position defended in Frege (1960) and Geach (1965): if denying A just is asserting A's negation, then they must carry equivalent effects, commitments, etc., by Leibniz's Law.

Rejectivism about negation is typically taken on board as part of an inferentialist or pragmatist story about meaning more broadly, according to which the meaning of some piece of language is to be explained by the uses it enters into. It would be odd (possible, but odd) to hold to rejectivism about negation without some commitment to a project like this. One would need some reason for why the content of a negation should be explained in a different way from other contents, and it's not obvious that such reason is forthcoming. Thus, rejectivists tend to be inferentialists or pragmatists more broadly; rejectivism is then the application of these broader views to the special case of negation.

Here are two examples. First, Rumfitt (2000) holds to *bilateralism* about content, according to which understanding a content A amounts to having a method that allows one to answer the question whether A. (Bilateralism thus combines verificationism, which requires having a method to answer the question 'yes' if the answer is 'yes', and falsificationism, which requires having a method to answer the question 'no' if the answer is 'no'. For more on verificationism and falsificationism, see e.g., Dummett (1976).) One can think of a content, on this view, as a pair consisting of (warranted) assertion conditions and (warranted) denial conditions. Negation, as an operation on content, is then easy to specify: it simply switches the members of the pair. The content of ⌜Not A⌝ is a pair whose assertion conditions are A's denial conditions, and whose denial conditions are A's assertion conditions. (Price (1983) and Smiley (1996) offer a similar motivation for rejectivism).

Second, Price (1990, 201x), while sympathetic with the bilateralist approach, seeks to dig deeper, and explain *why* denial would be so important in the first place. That is, Price wants to understand negation in terms of denial, and denial itself in terms of something else. His candidate: disagreement, particularly the sort of disagreement involved in formulating action plans. To draw attention to the import of disagreement, he (Price 1990:

224) offers a dialog between two characters, Me and You, whose language does not allow for denial or negation of any sort. As the scene opens, Me is looking for Fred:

> **Me:** Fred is in the kitchen. *(Sets off for kitchen.)*
> **You:** Wait! Fred is in the garden.
> **Me:** I see. But he is in the kitchen, so I'll go there. *(Sets off.)*
> **You:** You lack understanding. The kitchen is Fred-free.
> **Me:** Is it really? But Fred's in it, and that's the important thing. *(Leaves for kitchen.)*

Without denial, You has no way to call attention to Me's mistake. The best You can do is assert things (like *Fred is in the garden*, or *The kitchen is Fred-free*) that are incompatible with Me's beliefs; but if Me doesn't recognize that incompatibility, You has no way to make it explicit.[1] If You could simply *deny* that Fred is in the kitchen, then for Me to go on in the same way would not just indicate poor reasoning or a confused metaphysics; it would indicate failure to understand how denial works, Price says. Thus, according to Price, denial serves an important role in our conversations and plans, and negation serves to record this role at the level of content.

This gives some sense of the motivations that drive rejectivists. It also shows how the denial equivalence arises naturally from a rejectivist account. If the purpose of negation is simply to mark rejection or denial, the denial equivalence is how it gets this role. For the rejectivist, the denial equivalence is not just an equivalence; it's explanatory. It explains what it is to assert a negation in terms of the prior notion of denial.

This, however, leaves two related questions still to be answered. First, if assertion of a negation is to be understood in terms of denial, why would we have negation in the first place? That is, if we could do it all with denial, why wouldn't we simply stick to denial? Second, what role do negated contents play when they are not directly asserted, when they occur embedded in larger contents? The denial equivalence only tells us how to understand assertion of a negation, but not how to understand negated contents when they are not asserted.

Fortunately, the existence of the second question provides an answer to the first. We need an operation on contents like negation so that we can embed these contents into larger complexes. Denial, a speech act, cannot be embedded in this way, as mentioned above. This would be trouble, if all we had was denial. We'd easily be able to express something corresponding to an assertion of *Fred isn't in the kitchen*, simply by denying *Fred is in the kitchen*, but there would be nothing we could do corresponding to an assertion of *If Fred isn't in the kitchen, then he's in the garden*. Here, no speech act can play the role of the negated content, since that content occurs embedded in a conditional.

This just makes the second question more pressing, though; just what *is* the negation doing in *If Fred isn't in the kitchen, then he's in the garden*, if it cannot be replaced with a denial? The point is quite general: rejectivists must explain more than how assertion of negated contents works. They must also explain the role negated contents play as parts of more complex contents, where they are not (on their own) asserted. In the above example, the subcontent *Fred isn't in the kitchen* plays some role, but it's not by being asserted. (Similarly, the subcontent *Fred is in the kitchen* isn't being denied.) The same occurs in an assertion of the content *You thinks Fred isn't in the kitchen*; again, the content of You's thought isn't being asserted. If rejectivism is going to explain how negation works even in these contexts, it has to involve more than just the denial equivalence. (This is the germ of the so-called Frege-Geach problem; for a full presentation of the problem, see (Schroeder 2008). The approach sketched in the next paragraph is a rejectivist response to the Frege–Geach problem).

Here, there is a relatively common approach. At least in its broad details, this approach is recommended by all of Smiley (1996), Rumfitt (200x), and Price (1994). The key is to recall the rejectivists' appeal to use as primary in determining meaning, including the meaning of constructions like conditionals and propositional attitudes, in which negations might be embedded. As a simple example, let's look at the classical material conditional, and adopt Rumfitt's bilateralism. In order to specify the content of a material conditional, then, we must specify both the conditions under which it can be asserted and the conditions under which it can be denied. This is not hard, though; a material conditional ⌜A ⊃ B⌝ can be asserted iff either B can be asserted or A can be denied, and ⌜A ⊃ B⌝ can be denied iff A can be asserted and B can be denied. As Smiley (1996) and Rumfitt (2000) show, this strategy can be extended without trouble to the typical language of classical propositional logic, and Price (1994), argues that it can be extended beyond.[2] (Price focuses on natural-language conditionals, but his strategy is largely the same; for a very different response, see (Bendall 1979), who builds a new language without embedded negations).

Rejectivism gives us one way to understand the role that negation plays, by appealing to a prior notion of denial or rejection (and in Price's case, appealing to a more prior notion of disagreement).

3. Denying the Denial Equivalence

Above, I've considered theories that start from speech acts to explain negation. But there are other starting points available. Here, I focus on the theory presented in Priest (2006). This theory has important similarities (for our purposes) with that of Field (2008); Field's theory will be mentioned in passing, but Priest is much more explicit about the role negation plays in his theory, so I'll focus there. Priest claims (ch. 4) that negation is, first and foremost, a *contradictory-forming* operator. That is, he supposes that each content has a unique contradictory content, and claims that the negation of any content is its contradictory. The notion of contradictoriness is supposed to be prior; it is the relation that obtains, for example, between 'Socrates is mortal' and 'Socrates is not mortal', as well as between 'Some man is mortal' and 'No man is mortal'.

If claims A and B are contradictories, then 'we must have at least one of the pair, but not both' (78). That is, ⌜A or B⌝ must be necessary, and ⌜A and B⌝ must be impossible. As Priest points out, though, these conditions alone do not guarantee uniqueness; if C is any necessary truth, or D any impossibility, and A and B meet the conditions, then so do A and ⌜B and C⌝, as well as A and ⌜B or D⌝. So these conditions are necessary for contradictoriness, but not sufficient. (Priest does not offer sufficient conditions for contradictoriness.) Another key feature of contradictoriness, on Priest's view, is symmetry: if A is B's contradictory, then B is A's contradictory, too. This allows him to conclude that the negation of the negation of a content A is A itself.

By defining 'false' as 'has a true negation', Priest goes on to derive familiar truth-conditions for negation: the negation of a content is true iff the content is false (directly from the definition), and false iff the content is true (from the definition plus the double-negation equivalence). So Priest does not begin from negation's truth conditions, but rather from the idea of contradictoriness. From there, he derives the familiar truth-conditions. This might lead one to expect that Priest would explain the denial equivalence by appeal to contradictoriness. In fact, though, he rejects the denial equivalence altogether.

This is because Priest's view is nonclassical in its treatment of negation, but classical in its treatment of denial. First, the nonclassicality: Priest thinks that some contradictions are

true; that is, that for some contents, both they and their negations are true. (It would take us much too far afield to consider his reasons for this.) Consider a content A such that ⌜A and not A⌝ is true. Because negations are contradictories, ⌜A and not A⌝ is impossible, and so it's false. Thus, ⌜A and not A⌝, if true, is both true and false. Truth and falsity can overlap, on this view. Because of this, Priest must take negation to be *paraconsistent*; that is, he must insist that A and its negation, taken together, do not entail just any arbitrary content. (Note that the negation of classical logic is not paraconsistent; ⌜A and not A⌝ classically entails B, for any A and B.) But there are familiar paraconsistent negations that meet all of Priest's criteria, such as the negation of the logic LP (see Beall and van Fraassen (2003) or Priest (2008) for details of the logic).

Still, this might seem to create difficulty for expressing disagreement. After all, if I assert A, and Priest asserts A's negation, I can't safely conclude that we disagree. He might, after all, agree with both A and its negation. Here is where Priest's rejection of the denial equivalence does its work. For Priest, to deny A is to indicate one's rejection of A, and to reject A is to rule out accepting it: 'To reject something is to refuse to believe it: if it is in one's belief box one takes it out, but whether or not it was in there before, one resolves to keep it out' (103). To continue the metaphor, if Priest agrees with both A and its negation, then both A and its negation are in Priest's belief box; he rejects neither of them, and will (if sincere) deny neither of them. On the other hand, if Priest (sincerely) denies A, I can safely conclude that he disagrees with my assertion of A. Denial, rejection, and disagreement are thus all tied together for Priest, but they are not tied (at least not so directly) to negation and contradictoriness.

While truth and falsity overlap on Priest's view, acceptance and rejection do not; each perfectly excludes the other. This is the difference that undermines the denial equivalence. A denial of A is stronger than an assertion of A's negation. This seems to be a natural feature of any view that accepts some contradictions and still wants to be able to express disagreement consistently; disagreement must be expressed by something other than negation. Priest uses denial and rejection to do the work.

As Parsons (1984) argues, this feature is not unique to contradictory views; it is also a natural component of views that seek, for some content A, to reject both A and its negation. (Such a view is defended in e.g., Field (2008); again, his reasons for adopting the view are beside the point here.) For such a view, rejecting A had better *not* involve accepting A's negation, since the view seeks to reject that as well. Similarly, if I assert A and such a theorist wishes to disagree, they need some way to do it other than asserting A's negation, since they disagree with that as well. Field adopts the same solution as Priest (mutatis mutandis): he rejects the denial equivalence. For Field, though, denying a content A is *weaker* than asserting its negation, since there are contents he rejects without accepting their negations.

For Parsons, Priest, and Field, then, the mix of nonclassical negation with classical assertion and denial results in a rejection of the denial equivalence. Without the denial equivalence, though, new questions are raised. First, even on these accounts, there is a striking similarity between negation and denial, and it would be nice to have some story about why this is so. For example, denying a content A or denying a content B commits one to denying the conjunction ⌜A and B⌝, and whenever the content ⌜(not A) or (not B)⌝ is true, the content ⌜not (A and B)⌝ is true. (The other De Morgan equivalence also holds on these theories, for both denial and negation.) With the denial equivalence in place, one of these can be explained in terms of the other, or they can be seen to have a common source. But without the denial equivalence, it's hard to see how this can be more than a coincidence.

Second, negation is ubiquitous in natural languages; it would be hard to deny that it serves some important function. Suppose Priest is right, and that that function is to carry each content to its contradictory. This leaves us with a puzzle: what is it about contradictoriness that's so important? The answer can't be, for Priest, that contradictories constrain acceptance and rejection or assertion and denial. It can't be that contradictories are crucial to disagreement. (As we've seen above, this is precisely where Price's account locates the importance of negation).

Without these connections, though, contradictoriness seems idle, sterile. It's just one relation among many on contents, and it's hard to see what would be important enough about that relation to warrant its prominent role in natural language. If one were to explain negation's presence by starting, not from contradictoriness, but from a truth-conditional account, a similar problem would arise. What's so important about *that* truth-function, whichever one it is? (A similar objection is pressed in Price (1994).)

On the other hand, if rejectivism is true, there is a very natural story to be told about why negation has such an important role to play. We can see why rejection, denial, and disagreement would be important to just about any society; if negation simply encodes these into contents, we should expect negation to be important as well, as it seems to be.

Still, this is hardly a demonstrative argument. At best, it points to lacunae in Parsons's, Priest's, and Field's accounts, but it does not demonstrate that the lacunae cannot be filled.[3] If there were strong reason to reject the denial equivalence, we might even conclude that there *must* be some way to fill them, even if we didn't yet see how. Priest and Field offer, as reason to reject the denial equivalence, their nonclassical treatments of negation and classical treatments of assertion and denial. They both go to great lengths to argue for their nonclassical treatments of negation, and I won't enter into those arguments here. However, neither does much to defend their classical treatment of assertion and denial. If A and its negation are both true together, why is the appropriate response not simply to both accept and reject A, and why not indicate this simply by both asserting and denying A? This would allow for maintenance of the denial equivalence even in the presence of nonclassical negation. Mutatis mutandis, the same approach might work for Field. This too, though, is just a suggestion, and there's not space to explore it here. (It's worth noting that Restall (forthcoming) gives an independent argument for the claim that Priest and Field ought to explore nonclassical assertion and denial).

Independently of Priest's and Field's theories, though, there is at least one more argument against the denial equivalence in the literature. The argument stems from Parsons (1984). Here, Parsons is arguing against the denial equivalence precisely in order to make room for the sort of split between negation and denial that Priest and Field invoke. (Parsons calls the denial equivalence the 'Equivalence Thesis'.) The argument proceeds from examples. Parsons offers a variety of speech acts in which a content is rejected without, he says, any commitment to its negation being accepted. If this analysis is correct, then these are counterexamples to the denial equivalence.

Consider an utterance of 'Paul Bunyan is *not* bald, since there isn't any Paul Bunyan', or, more simply, an utterance of 'Paul Bunyan is *not* bald', in a context that makes clear that the reason for the utterance is that the speaker thinks there isn't any Paul Bunyan. Parsons claims that the speaker, in these cases, does not commit herself to asserting the negation of the content *Paul Bunyan is bald*. Rather, she simply denies that content (in the first case, going on to give a reason for her denial). Parsons gives further examples: 'I have *not* stopped beating my wife' (because I never started); 'The purpose of life is *not* to serve mankind' (because life has no purpose). He offers, 'The emphasized ''not'' does

not stand for part of the content of an assertion; it rather signals rejection of the remaining content' (150).

While he does not follow Parsons in claiming that these cases are best understood in terms of rejection or denial, Priest as well points to these cases as cases where 'not' does not express negation; he cites 'I am not his wife; he is my husband' as a sentence in which 'not' is not a negation (Priest 2006: 77).

Parsons's and Priest's examples are members of a fascinating genus, known to some linguists as 'metalinguistic negation'. There is convincing reason, however, presented in e.g., Carston (1996) and Geurts (1998), to think that metalinguistic negation is just ordinary negation playing its ordinary role, albeit in special contexts. There is not space to evaluate these arguments here (and they are not uncontroversial; see e.g., Horn (2001) for another perspective), but note that if Carston and Geurts are right, then Parsons's and Priest's examples fail to support the claim that denial should be separated from the assertion of a negation, since the examples can equally well be analyzed as either.

4. Conclusion

Since Frege (1960) and Geach (1965), it has been taken as a commonplace that denial and rejection are to be understood as special kinds of assertion and belief, respectively: kinds involving negation. As we've seen, though, this view has been called into question from multiple angles. In the end, I've argued that rejectivism provides a more satisfying alternative to the orthodoxy than does Priest's reliance on the notion of contradictories, largely because of rejectivism's endorsing the denial equivalence. But there has not been space here to explore these arguments to their full depth, or to explore the differences between these heterodoxies and the orthodox position, which mostly hinge on broader differences in the philosophy of language. Still, I hope that my above consideration of the two heterodoxies serves to shed some light on the relation between them, and on our understanding of negation as a whole.

Acknowledgment

Short Biography

David Ripley's research focuses on language, logic, and cognitive science, with a focus on the relation between formal models and natural languages. He has authored or co-authored papers in these areas for *Analysis, Ethical Theory & Moral Practice*, and *The Journal of Philosophical Logic*. His current research involves the use of experimental methods in studying the formal properties of vague language. He is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Melbourne; before coming to Melbourne, he was a postdoctoral researcher at Institut Jean-Nicod. He holds a BA in Linguistics and Philosophy from the University of Connecticut at Storrs and a PhD in Philosophy from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Notes

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[1] This might hold even if their language includes 'incompatible', for Lewis Carroll-like reasons. We can easily imagine the conversation continuing a few more steps:

You: Hold on! Not only is Fred in the garden, his being in the garden is incompatible with his being in the kitchen.

Me: I agree completely. Just the same, he's in the kitchen. *(Sets off again.)*

What You needs is not for Me to accept a *claim* about incompatibility, but to *treat* things as incompatible; these are distinct. I'm unsure, however, if it can plausibly be supposed that Me understands You's claim in this case. If it cannot, then it's best to suppose that You and Me's language can't contain 'incompatible' either; it's too like a negation. (The same point could be made about You's use of 'Fred-free' in Price's dialog.)

[2] Much of the rejectivist literature focuses on the debate between classical and intuitionist logics, which is beside the point here, but matters for the details of this approach to embedding. In addition to the above-cited papers, Humberstone (2000) is an excellent source on the relation between rejectivism and that debate.

[3] An anonymous referee raises a possible approach: perhaps there is a close enough connection between contradictoriness on the one hand and rejection and denial on the other that a marker of contradictoriness can derive its importance from the importance of rejection and denial, even if the connection is not close enough to support the denial equivalence. (A similar approach might be suggested by remarks in Priest (2006: 110).) After all, even for Priest, most of the time asserting ⌜not A⌝ goes together with denying A; the exceptions tend to be paradoxical or otherwise unusual cases.

This suggestion, on its own, fails to close the gap. What needs to be explained is natural languages' marking so prominently the relation of contradictoriness. To concede that what we *really* care about is denial is to leave us with the original question: why wouldn't we just mark what we care about, rather than an unimportant thing often associated with it? There may in fact be good reasons for this – again, I do not claim there is no possible explanation – but those reasons need to be supplied before we have a candidate explanation. (The most obvious possibility is that contradictoriness is easier to grasp, and so to mark, than denial or rejection; but this lacks all plausibility.)

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